

Memories of a Childhood 1939-45★

by RAF Cosford Roadshow

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My parents were originally from the Potteries, and came to Brierley Hill in 1924, to find work. In 1918 my father had been a soldier and on the day he was boarding a ship to Egypt, his mother received the telegram to say that his eldest brother Fred had been killed in France.. When in 1939 war was declared, it made a deep impression on me, to see my parents so upset by the news of war.

My two brothers and I lived with our parents in a two bedroomed council house in Hawbush Road. Following the announcement of war, teachers were short, and although I was five in 1939, I was not able to start school until 1940. The boys could not go to scouts and cubs, and our Sunday School opposite the church in Albion Street was commandeered by the War Office as a Report Centre, where all local information concerned with the war effort, defence, air raids, bomb damage etc. was collated. For Sunday school, we used a small room built on the back of the Church.

My father was an air raid warden, and would be out most evenings, and at night when there were air raids. Fred joined the Air Training Corps. My friends father was in the Home Guard In 1940 an Anderson shelter was built by my father and the boys in a deep pit in the garden. The bent corrugated iron sheets forming the sides and roof were covered with soil and turf. Even I had to bend to climb in and we always went in backwards to get down the ladder. When I was standing on the floor my head was level with the top step.

Inside there was a thick blackout curtain over the door opening. It was lit by candles or a hurricane lamp, and many times, as children, we went to bed in the bunks built against the walls There were occasions when we didn't start the night in the shelter, but when the sirens went off we had to climb down in the middle of

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the night. Our neighbours used to come in when there was heavy bombing. They had been unable to build a shelter in their garden , because it was in heavy clay soil which kept filling with water.

I often went with my friend who lived over the road, to visit her Aunt in Fisher Street, and one day when we went to see her, the house next door had been bombed. Fortunately the family that night had been in their shelter and were not injured. Another house had been hit in Moor Lane, and I went with my brothers to see it. When the school air raid shelters were built we practiced filing into the shelters in classes. They were like long tunnels with benches on each side, where the teachers got us to sing songs have guessing games and sometimes mental arithmetic. . One time I remember the siren going while we were in school. The memory of running across the school field, wondering if we were going to get shot, stayed with me a long time. It must have been very difficult for the teachers, and many times classes were doubled up so we were sitting in threes at two bench desks. On more than one occasion in the Junior School, the headmaster was taking the whole school in the hall. Books were short, and we often had to share, or copy exercises off the blackboard.

My parents agreed to have an evacuee to stay with us but when the bus arrived, the little girl, aged three was accompanied by her mother so my parents agreed to take them both, They had been living in the East End of London, and her husband was in the army. Therefore, we had three beds in the big bedroom for our family, and Mrs Dray and Iris shared the small room. In 1942 we moved next door with three bedrooms, and by 1943 the evacuees had gone back to London. All the windows in the house were fitted with black paper roller blinds, and we had to make sure the windows were covered before switching on the light at night. Sleeping in the dark seemed normal.

Rationing of food must have been very difficult. We had to register and stay with our chosen traders for things like milk, meat, and groceries. My mother labelled a jam jar for each one's individual sugar ration . We soon learned not to ask for extra sugar. She also gave us children our own sweet points, so that we could use our pocket money,

My mother could not buy the week's meat for all seven of us at once because we did not have a fridge. She persuaded the butcher to let her to buy the two ounces of corned beef allowed weekly for each person as 14 ounces,so that she could make one meal for all of us. Our milkman had a horse and cart, (petrol was rationed) and he used to fill our jugs from a churn. Clothes were rationed. My grandmother made my mother and myself winter coats from dyed blankets. My mother had difficulty getting school uniform for my brother and I.

Coal was rationed, so we never had more than one fire in the house. Every day the kitchen range was lit to heat the water, and cook the dinner. But on Sunday afternoon the hot gleads from the fire were carried into the front room, where we always had tea. Every other day dinner was cooked in the evening.

At school we all had a daily third of a pint of milk to drink. One winter the milk froze in the bottles and I remember the teacher putting the milk on the stove in the classroom to thaw. School dinners were started which were cooked in the kitchens at the British Restaurant and delivered to the school in big metal containers. My mother was directed to start work. The first job she had was on the stamping machines at Baldwins, working 6am to 2 pm. She hated the work, and the noise. My friend's mother worked 2 to 10 pm, so mornings before school I went to my friend's house and then after school she came home with me, until her father was back.

My father had an allotment, and we grew most of our vegetables besides the blackcurrants, rhubarb, and loganberries in our garden, and in the autumn go blackberry picking. It was usually my job to go to the shop along the road to fetch a "shillings" worth of potatoes. Usually about 8 - 10 lbs, but in the winter sometimes even these were rationed, especially if there were heavy frosts.

Oranges were rare, and the first banana I remember having was a dried one, given to me after the war. We never had icecream until after the war.

When Victory in Europe was announced, there were great celebrations, and a big bonfire was built on the waste land we called the tip, now the top of Swan Lane. I remember going on a bus with my friend and her sister, and our parents. All the way there and back we were watching our for flags and bunting and houses lit up with fairy lights. Dudley top church was lit up, and everywhere to me seemed magical. I couldn't remember seeing so many lights except on the pictures inside the cinema.

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